

Massive Poll Finds Minority Looming

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Ontario is headed toward a minority government for the first time in decades with the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives deadlocked, according to a major new poll.

A Forum Research survey of 40,750 people — one of the largest polling samples in Canadian political history — has the two parties separated by only 107 respondents, each holding 35 per cent. (14,064 said they will vote Liberal, while 13,957 selected the Conservatives.) Meanwhile, the New Democrats were at 23 per cent and the Green Party at 5 per cent.

“Obviously, no one has closed the deal,” Forum president Lorne Bozinoff told the Star on Friday.

Because of the large number of voters surveyed Forum was also able to provide riding-by-riding results. If those numbers

were to be repeated on Oct. 6, the Liberals and Tories would be tied at 47 seats with the NDP only holding 13 seats in the 107-member Legislature. However, the results for at least 28 ridings are within the margin of error, so seat predictions are not nearly as reliable as the total sample.

Even so, none of the parties appears likely at this point to be able to win the 54 seats needed for a majority government, which leaves Ontario poised for its first minority government since 1985.

After that vote, the Liberals and NDP signed an accord that toppled the Tories, who had been in power for 42 years.

Bozinoff said it's still possible for one of the parties to break out and win a majority, noting Tuesday's provincially televised leaders' debate could be crucial.

“The Tories are pretty much exactly where they were a month ago and it looks like the Liberals have cut into the NDP vote,” he said, adding Horwath “has not made as much of an impression as she should have.”

“She’s been lost among the other two and it’s almost as if she’s too nice to make an impression.”

The results also mean the race has tightened since Forum’s last poll, which was conducted three weeks ago. Then, the Conservatives were leading the Liberals 35-30, with the NDP at 26 per cent and Greens at 6 per cent.

That means only the veteran Liberal leader has improved his fortunes during the writ period while his three rookie rivals have faltered.

There was a similar pattern when respondents were asked who would make the best premier. McGuinty was selected by 37 per cent, up five points from earlier in the summer. For his part Hudak has held steady in the low 30s and Horwath is in the mid-20s.

This latest interactive voice-response telephone poll — conducted Thursday and Friday and considered accurate to within 0.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 — highlights challenges for both McGuinty and Hudak.

“The Tories need an urban or at least a GTA strategy,” said Bozinoff, pointing out Hudak, whose party hasn’t won a Toronto seat since 1999, is getting shut out in the city and is faring poorly in the 905 region — especially Mississauga.

“Conversely, the Liberals are in need of a rural strategy,” said Bozinoff, warning most of the Grits’ losses appear to be coming to Tories outside major centres.

At dissolution, the Liberals held 70 seats, the Tories 25, the NDP 10, and there were two vacancies that had been Grit constituencies.

Bozinoff said winning the election could hinge on fewer than a dozen ridings where the poll shows the top candidates are within two percentage points of one another.

“Getting out the vote and being organized will count. Both the Liberals and the Tories have to be focusing on the same seven ridings or so,” he said.

“They’re so close, but they’re so far.”

Even with such a huge poll, Bozinoff emphasized there are some questionable results.

The survey suggests the Liberals would win Parkdale-High Park, an NDP stronghold for dynamo Cheri Di Novo, but lose St. Catharines, a seat held since 1977 by popular Grit Jim Bradley. As well, it forecasts the Conservatives picking up Liberal-held Kitchener-Conestoga and Kitchener Centre, but falling short in Tory Elizabeth Witmer’s long-time riding of Kitchener-Waterloo. And McGuinty himself is shown as only

slightly ahead in his home riding of Ottawa South, one of the most reliably Liberal ridings in the province.

“There are a few anomalies,” Bozinoff said.

Despite the poll’s indication that Tory support is sputtering in urban Ontario, the PC leader insisted he still has the wind at his back.

“Whether I am here in Thunder Bay, home in Niagara or in Mississauga or Toronto, people don’t want four more years of Dalton McGuinty,” Hudak said after he and Horwath had participated in a debate on northern issues.

Horwath rejected suggestions she had peaked.

“On the contrary. I’m pretty excited about the next couple of days leading up to the debate that happens in Toronto and the last week and a half of the campaign,” she said in Thunder Bay.

Speaking to the Star editorial board, McGuinty said his slow and steady approach appears to be paying off.

“We have run pretty well the same campaign that we have always run,” he said.

“Some of the best advice I ever got was from (former prime minister) Jean Chretien, he said: ‘Don’t watch any TV. Don’t listen to the radio or read any of the papers.’ People tell me what I need to know. Get into a zone and stay there — that is what I am doing.”

With files from Tanya Talaga